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ABSTRACT

A study of the conflict management behavior of 103 school superintendents and city managers in two major metropolitan areas revealed that the superintendents were more professionalized than the city managers but, when dealing with the public, were less likely to use the analytic-technocratic conflict management methods typically associated with professionals. City managers tended to use these methods both when resolving intraorganizational conflict and when resolving issues involving the public, while superintendents managing public-oriented conflict tended to deviate from their professional opinions and engage in the bargaining, lobbying, and compromising behavior typical of the political-bargaining approach. Data for the study were gathered using interviews and questionnaires, and were subjected to log-linear analysis for the purpose of constructing a model of conflict management behavior. Two school closing cases are isolated and described as prototypical examples of the two identified approaches to public-related conflict management. In addition to the results noted above, the study found that, unlike city managers, superintendents were more likely to confront intraorganizational conflict than public-related conflict. The researchers suggest that superintendents' reliance on political-bargaining methods may be forced by the more ideologically-rooted nature of the public issues they do face. (Author/PGD)

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Technocracy or Politics?
Conflict Management Behavior in
Public Managerial Professions

by

Jane Reisman

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TECHNOCRACY OR POLITICS?:
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT BEHAVIOR IN PUBLIC MANAGERIAL PROFESSIONS

Introduction

In a study of the conflict management behavior of school superintendents and city managers, I found that school superintendents are apt to use political-bargaining strategies when managing conflict that involves the public. City managers, in contrast, are more likely to approach conflict in an analytic-technocratic manner, regardless of whether the conflict pertains to intraorganizational affairs or to issues that concern the public. Interestingly enough, superintendents are more professionalized than city managers. Yet, superintendents are more likely than city managers to deviate from their professional opinions and engaged in bargaining, lobbying, and compromising behavior in the management of public-oriented conflict. As one respondent commented, "Public input does not necessarily make the issue have a better resolution--it's only more acceptable."

This political approach to conflict management by alleged professionals is dissonant with the attributes conventionally accorded to professionalism in the sociological literature. This paper elaborates upon such dissonance in order to enhance our understanding of how managerial professionals manage conflict in public-serving organizations. Interview and questionnaire material gathered from a stratified probability sample of 103 school superintendents and city managers in two major metropolitan areas inform this elaboration.*

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*These data were collected as part of a comparative study of conflict management in educational and municipal governance sponsored by the Center for Educational policy and Management at the University of Oregon. Harmon Zeigler and Ellen Kehoe are the principal investigators of this study; the other investigators are Jane Reisman and John Polito.

Conflict Management Styles

March and Simon (1959) describe two types of processes commonly used in managing organizational conflict: analytic and bargaining. The analytic process is technocratically oriented. It relies upon information gathering, problem solving, bureaucratic rules and goals, and persuasion for the purpose of achieving common overall objective. The bargaining process, in contrast, is more political. While bargaining behavior is generally preceded by the analytic process, it evolves into trade-offs, compromises and cultivation of powerful allies, or cooptation.

The technocratic-analytic style is more consistent with a professional ideology, i.e., reliance on expertise, than is the political-bargaining style. As the literature on professions suggests, professionals are trained to be experts with a systematic body of knowledge of making technically rational decisions in their work. They prefer maximum autonomy in their work, as well as self regulation and reliance on the canons of their professional education and association (Carr-Saunders 1933; Greenwood 1966; Hall 1967, 1968; Wilensky 1964). Essentially, the technocratic style (and its association with expertise) is the basis of professional power within the organizational context.

However, public managers are often involved in conflicts in which the technocractic-analytic style is mitigated by political factors. This is particularly the case in public-oriented conflicts. Unlike other professionals, public managers are accountable to their clients. As Larson sees it, they are "directly and structurally tied to their clients" (1977, p. 18).

Client interests may be directly expressed by members of the public and/or imposed by public delegates such as school boards or city councils. Professionalized public managers are therefore required to make technically competent decisions for the public good while, simultaneously, attempting to gain public acceptance of these decisions. In order to meet these dual requirements, public managers may adopt a political-bargaining conflict management style rather than a technocratic-analytic one.

Still, as March and Simon note, the political-bargaining conflict management style is generally preceded by technocratic-analytic strategies. Yet, the important distinction--basically a conceptual one--is that political-bargaining behavior leaps beyond the expected behavior of professionals by embracing traditional political activities over and above the politics of expertise. Two prototypic cases from the interview data are detailed below. They serve to clarify these distinctions by showing two different styles for managing a major public-oriented conflict in school districts--that of school closure decisions.

A Comparison of Political-Bargaining and Technocratic-Analytic/Conflict Management Behavior

During the present period of retrenchment in local government, many school superintendents are faced with the onerous chore of consolidating their resources through school closure. Regardless of the physical condition of the school building or the characteristics of the neighborhood in which the school is located, school closure evokes great opposition from the members of the school site. Essentially, those people affected by a

school closure decision are expected to accept the "public good" (Banfield and Wilson 1963) over their private interests, which involves pragmatic convenience and emotional affinity to their neighborhood school. In most instances, decisions presented as technically correct solutions, i.e., calculated on the basis of enrollment trends and physical condition of school buildings, are not compelling enough to the affected parties. Rather, maximum public participation in closure decisions, development of constituent support, trade-offs, and bargaining are more likely to result in acceptance of the closure decisions. The former procedure is characterized as technocratic while the latter procedure is considered to be political.

Several years ago, Superintendent "A" proposed to the school board that three schools be closed. This announcement evoked a hostile reaction from the community. Rather than following through with the proposal and pushing it to a vote, the superintendent withdrew it and introduced a process of participation into the closure decisions. As the superintendent explains,

> "The community erupted--I misread them and thought they were ready for it. I could have rammed the closure through but took a step back instead and got the community involved. This way they owned the decision and the district ended up closing six schools [twice the number of schools initially recommended] by a unanimous vote."

This politically oriented behavior on the part of Superindent "A" enabled school closures to occur with minimal negative consequences. Since these initial closures, a formal process has been established which integrates the concerns presented in the initial closure decisions. Early on, the public is notified by school principals that a decision is being

contemplated. The community is also informed of how much money will be saved and how that money will be reallocated. Under this newly established process, three additional schools have been closed with minimal opposition.

In another example, Superintendent "B" has been experiencing ongoing conflict since his initial proposal for school closures. Based on the advisory committee's report and the superintendent's own data analysis, the superintendent recommended that a high school be closed as soon as possible. This recommendation aroused substantial community resistance, which was not adequately addressed. As Superintendent "B" explains,

> [After cutbacks in state finances] "it appeared that we would have to make immense cuts in our financing. The board set up a committee [as it tends to do] of teachers, students, and citizens to study the issue. The committee identified the need to cut several million dollars worth of programs. They suggested closing a high school which had been experiencing declining enrollment. This decision had to be made quickly if it was going to be implemented before the beginning of the following year. We had one month to decide which school to close."

The superintendent and a newly appointed school closure committee analyzed data and held public forums. He explained, "Usually I like to let people argue themselves into exhaustion but there was only one month for this, which is not very long."

Following the superintendent's official recommendation, an unsettled board voted 3-2 in favor of school closure. A disgruntled citizens' group further protested the decision and filed a legal suit. The legal battle went as far as the state supreme court which, ultimately, upheld the legality of the district's decision. Although this court ruling was favorable to the district, the legal battle had kept the controversy alive longer

than would have otherwise been the case and "left a deeper scar than if the litigation had not occurred." Furthermore, the attorney who had represented the plaintiffs was subsequently elected to the school board, which presents the possibility for future political friction. Still, the superintendent surmises, "Occasionally, you have a war. People in this community are savvy enough to use every inch of the system. . . . On many issues it's never clear when the losers have finally lost and the winners have finally won."

Clearly, Superintendent "B" behaved technocratically throughout the school closure process. In view of what he considered to be an urgent need for immediate school closure, he followed rational, analytical procedures in reaching his recommendation. As this superintendent pointed out, he would have preferred to air the decision in the community more extensively than was possible. However, his failure to do so resulted in severe community conflict and additional financial and organizational costs.

These prototypic cases exemplify different results obtained from technocratic and political approaches to similar conflict situations involving the public. These particular cases indicate an advantage in behaving politically rather than technocratically in extraorganizational conflict. Although technocratic behavior does not always intensify conflict and incite controversy, this does appear to be a tendency--particularly in the absence of shared values and in situations where the public is willing to challenge official decisions.

Lewis Coser's (1956) work on social conflict supports this contention. Coser suggests that conflicts occurring among parties that share basic

assumptions concerning the foundations of their relationship tend to be positive and functional. These conflicts may lead to adjustments in norms and power relationships according to the perceptions of the conflicting parties. However, when there is an absence of shared assumptions, the resolution of conflict may be more likely to result in disruption or destruction rather than adjustment.

In general, participants in intraorganizational conflicts share more of a common understanding of operating ground rules than participants in conflict that occurs between organizational members and parties outside the organizational boundaries. In the latter instance, public managers, regardless of their professional commitment, may find the political-bargaining approach to be more effective than the technocratic-analytic approach for managing conflict. Thus, in addition to professionalism, the content of conflict is expected to affect the conflict management style of public managers. This expectation is further explored through multivariate statistical analysis using a general log-linear modelling technique.

The Interrelationship between Professionalism, Content of Conflict, and Conflict Management Behavior

Followigg procedures of general log-linear analysis (see Davis 1974; Goodman 1969, 1972; Knoke and Burke 1980) several competing statistical hypotheses were examined in order to construct a model of conflict management behavior that is both theoretically and statistically informative. Four factors are involved in these hypotheses: professionalism, content of conflict, occupation, and conflict management behavior. I will briefly define these factors and then review the results of this examination.

Professionalism is measured by individual scores on a modified version of Richard Hall's Professional Attitude Scale (1967). Eleven questions were selected from the original scale via a factor analysis to capture dimensions of work autonomy, regard for professional organizations, and commitment to one's occupation (α = .62). (Scale items are listed in Appendix A.) Both the school superintendents and city managers generally scored high on this scale; in a range from 10 to 50, the mean score is 35. This mean score is used to distinguish between low and high categories of professionalism. Note that these rankings are relative to the sample and not absolute measures, given the skewed distribution of the sample scores.

Occupation, too, may be viewed as a proxy for professionalism. While the mean socre on the professional attitude scale was above the midpoint, school superintendents and city managers scored differently on this scale: 69 percent of the superintendents had a high professionalism score compared to 42 percent of the city managers (χ^2 = 6.19 1df p = .01). Superintendents also possess stronger structural attributes of professionalism than city managers in terms of level of education, specialized educational training, credentialling requirements, and professional organization memberships.

Content of conflict is defined as either intraorganizational conflict or public-oriented conflict. Examples of intraorganizational conflict include collective bargaining, employee transfers and assignments, and department reorganizations. Public-oriented conflict includes school closures, planning and zoning decisions, and tax referendums. This measure, as well as the measure of conflict management behavior, is based on a detailed

interview question regarding a major conflict episode. Each respondent reported an incident of conflict that had a major impact on the organization and discussed the parties involved and the method of conflict resolution.

Conflict management behavior was assessed according to the dichotomization discussed earlier between political-bargaining behavior and technocratic-analytic behavior. Independent coding by two coders produced a 89.9 percent intercoder reliability of this assessment.

General Log-Linear Analysis

General log-linear analysis reveals several significant hypothesized relationships between professional attitude, occupation, content of conflict, and conflict management behavior. However, when these hypotheses are compared to each other, only one hypothesis stands out as providing significant information that is not already captured by other hypotheses. This model (hypothesis 3) includes four bivariate associations: (1) professionalism and occupation (2) content of conflict and occupation (3) content of conflict and conflict management behavior, and (4) occupation and conflict management behavior. (Table 1 provides the summary for this and the other hypotheses.) These associations can be illustrated as follows:

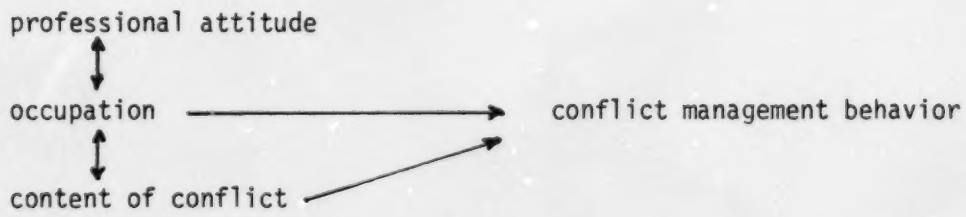

Table 1: Summary of General Log-Linear Model Examining the Relationship Between Content of Conflict (CONTENT), Professionalism (PRO), Occupation (OCC), and Conflict Management Behavior (CMB).

Hypothesis (H)	Information Statistic (IS)[1]	Degrees of Freedom (DF)	Probability[2] (PROB)	Base H	Difference in IS	Difference in DF	Difference[3] in PROB
H_1 (CONTENT)+ (PRO)+(OCC)+ (CMB)	27.272	11	.004				
H_2 (CONTENT X PRO)+ (CONTENT X OCC)+ (CONTENT X CMB)+ (PRO X OCC)+ (PRO X CMB)+ (OCC X CMB)	2.750	5	.73*	H_3	.93	2	.50<p<.70
				H_4	5.365	2	.05<p<.10
H_3 (PRO X OCC)+ (CONTENT X OCC)+ (CONTENT X CMB)+ (OCC X CMB)	3.680	7	.8158*				
H_4 (PRO X OCC)+ (CONTENT X PRO)+ (CONTENT X CMB)+ (PRO X CMB)	8.115	7	.3225*				
H_5 (PRO X OCC)+ (OCC X CMB X (CONTENT)	2.845	6	.8281*	H_3	.835	1	.30<p<.50
H_6 (PRO X OCC)+ (PRO X CMB X CONTENT)	1.282	6	.2955*	H_4	.833	1	.30<p<.50
H_7 (PRO X OCC)+ (OCC X CMB X CONTENT)+ (PRO X CMB X CONTENT)	1.424	3	.6999*	H_2	1.326	2	.50<p<.70
H_8 (PRO X OCC X CMB X CONTENT)	.000	0	-1.000**				

[1] The information statistic provides similar information as the chi-quare statistic. This is used to test the null hypothesis that the model fits the observed cell frequencies.

[2] Researchers conventionally seek a probability level of .10 and upward when using general log-linear analysis. This contrasts general diagnostic techniques which test for independence, in which .05 and below are sought.

[3] This probability level reflects a chi-square distribution after examining differences in the information statistic and degrees of freedom for competing significant hypotheses.

* Fail to reject this hypothesis.

*This is the saturated model which always provides a perfect fit between the predicted and observed values. The burden of proof is on the researcher to provide an alternative model with better theoretical interpretability.

Substantively, the selected model reinforces the association between occupation and professionalism: superintendents as a group possess a stronger professional attitude than city managers. The other bivariate associations included in this model indicate that school superintendents are also more likely than city managers to have a political-bargaining conflict management behavior when faced with a major conflict. The content of conflict, as expected, also affects conflict management behavior since political-bargaining conflict management bheavior is most likely to occur in public-oriented conflict. This model further shows that the major conflicts faced by school superintendents are more likely to be intraorganizational than public-oriented in contrast to the greater occurrence of public-oriented major conflicts faced by city managers (Table 2 provides the standardized effect parameters for these associations).

There is an element of unexpected irony in these findings. First, we note a conspicuous absence of a relationship between individual professional attitude and conflict management behavior. Instead, we see that specific occupation is a more important influence on conflict management behavior than individual professional attitude. Yet, surprisingly, the more professionalized occupational group, superintendents, is more apt to depart from technocratic behavior and leap into the realm of traditional political activities than the less professionalized occupational group, city managers. This propensity for political behavior by superintendents occurs despite the less frequent occurrences of public-oriented conflict for this group. Since public-oriented conflict is more commonly associated with political behavior than is the case for intraorganizational conflict,

Table 2: Standardized Effects of Relationships in Selected Model (Hypothesis 3).

Occupation

Professionalism	Superintendent	City Managers
Low	-2.05 (16)	2.05 (30)
High	2.05 (35)	-2.05 (22)
	(n=51)	(n=52)

Conflict Management Behavior

Occupation	Political	Technocratic
Superintendent	1.64 (20)	-1.64 (31)
City Manager	-1.64 (14)	1.64 (38)
	(n=34)	(n=69)

Conflict Management Behavior

Content	Political	Technocratic
Intraorganizational	-3.05 (8)	3.05 (39)
Extraorganizational	3.05 (26)	-3.05 (30)
	(n=34)	(n=69)

Occupation

Content	Superintendent	City Managers
Intraorganizational	1.63 (27)	-1.63 (20)
Extraorganizational	-1.63 (24)	1.63 (32)
	(n=51)	(n=52)

it is surprising that the group with less frequent public-oriented conflict is also the more politically oriented group.

Summary and Implications

The likelihood for members of a strongly professionalized occupation, superintendents, to be politicized conflict managers when confronting their clients suggests that they are either willing to and/or pressured to compromise their professional wisdom in order to resolve this type of conflict. Two possible explanations for this behavior will be explored. The first explanation relates to the intensity of conflict involved in school districts. The second explanation questions the validity of their professional status.

Earlier analysis of related data with this same research sample revealed that superintendents experience a lower level of conflict in school districts than city managers face in municipalities (Zeigler et al. 1981a, 1981b). At the same time, conflicts that superintendents encounter are often deeply rooted in ideological concerns that challenge the very goals of the educational system, e.g., school closure decisions, curriculum choices, and so on. As the literature on social conflict suggests, ideologically rooted conflict is extremely difficult to resolve and more prone to result in social disintegration than is the case for routine conflicts or conflicts based on consensual values (Coser 1956). Hence, the circumstances surrounding school district conflict may cause political-bargaining behavior to be more essential for school superintendents than is the case for city managers. Even though superintendents may initially approach

conflict technocratically, i.e., guided by their professional opinion, the nature of the conflict which they encounter may force them to engage in compromises, trade-offs, or cooptation.

Alternatively, the political and conventionally unprofessional behavior demonstrated by superintendents may bring into question the legitimacy of their professional status. A great deal of controversy in the sociological literature on professions has already addressed the question What is the professional? (Wilensky 1964; Hall 1968; Larson 1977; Vollmer and Mills 1965, 1966). While systematic attempts have been made to define the meaning of professionalism in a sense that has some discriminatory power, this debate continues. Larson (1977) recently suggested that school superintendents, for example, may emulate the characteristics of professionals, but mainly for ideological manipulation. She calls into question whether or not they even possess the systematic body of knowledge that forms the basis of deference to professional expertise. Perhaps, in accordance with Larson's position, the work of school superintendents and, likewise, city managers, requires interpersonal skills that are not necessarily rooted in technology. Political behavior may, in fact, be required in their work. The greater likelihood for superintendents, in comparison to city managers, to behave politically while simultaneously holding up a shield of professional expertise, further implies that superintendents are more effective conflict managers than city managers.

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Appendix A

Professional Attitude Scale

The following questions are an attempt to measure certain aspects of what is commonly called "professionalism." The referent in the questions is your own profession. Each item, then, should be answered in light of the way you yourself both feel and behave as a member of your particular profession.

There are five possible responses to each item. If the item corresponds VERY WELL (VW) to your own attitudes and/or behavior, circle that response. If it corresponds WELL (W), POORLY (P), or VERY POORLY (VP), mark the appropriate response. The middle category (?) is designed to indicate an essentially neutral opinion about the item. We realize it is difficult for you to single out one preference for each item. However, please answer all items choosing the response that best reflects your opinion.

		Very Well	Well	Neutral	Poorly	Very Poorly
1.	My fellow professionals have a pretty good idea about other's competence.	(VW)	W	?	P	VP
2.	I don't have much opportunity to exercise my own judgment.	VW	W	?	P	(VP)
3.	I believe that the professional organization(s) should be supported.	(VW)	W	?	P	VP
4.	Some other occupations are actually more important to society than mine is.	VW	W	?	P	(VP)
5.	The professional organization doesn't really do too much for the average member.	VW	W	?	P	(VP)
6.	We really have no way of judging each other's competence.	VW	W	?	P	(VP)
7.	Although I would like to, I really don't read the journals too often.	VW	W	?	P	(VP)
8.	Most people would stay in the profession even if their incomes were reduced.	(VW)	W	?	P	VP
9.	My own decisions are subject to review.	VW	W	?	P	(VP)
10.	There is not much opportunity to judge how another person does his/her work.	VW	W	?	P	(VP)
11.	There are very few people who don't really believe in their work.	(VW)	W	?	P	VP

[The circled responses reflect the strongest professional attitude.]